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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of selected coping strategies in dealing with teacher stress in the classroom setting. Factors contributing to teacher burnout, (e.g., class size, school size, student behavior), were also weighed. Data were gathered from 117 elementary and secondary teachers by means of a questionnaire, and the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which provides a measure of perceived burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of competence and achievement. Eight coping strategies were measured: (1) confronting coping; (2) distancing; (3) self-controlling; (4) seeking social support; (5) accepting responsibility; (6) planful problem solving; (7) escape/avoidance; and (8) positive reappraisal. An analysis of the findings indicated that the use of certain coping strategies tends to contribute to, rather than reduce, the pressure of stress in classroom teachers, and that specific behaviors associated with ineffective coping strategies should be identified and avoided in practice. Data from the study are presented in tables and references are included. (JD)

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The Successful Coping Strategies - The Answer to Teacher Stress?

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SUCCESSFUL COPING STRATEGIES - THE ANSWER TO TEACHER STRESS?

BACKGROUND:

Stress research investigating burnout has identified three dimensions of the phenomena which occur especially within the professions dealing with human services (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976, 1978, 1979; Maslach and Jackson, 1979; Maslach and Pines, 1977). These three concepts of stress are: (a) Emotional Exhaustion manifested by feelings of being drained or used up, physically fatigued, (b) Depersonalization or an unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of one's service and (c) Personal Accomplishment or feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's self and profession.

Teacher stress or burnout has been recognized in many educational settings (Borthwick, 1982; Crane & Iwanicki, 1984; Farber, 1983; Fielding & Gall, 1982; Horton, 1984; Hudson & Meagher, 1984; McIntyre, 1982, 1984).

Our previous research (Connolly & Sanders, 1986) indicated that stress continues to be a phenomenon experienced by classroom teachers, especially in the concept areas of becoming unfeeling and reacting impersonally in the classroom environment (Depersonalization), and realizing few feelings of accomplishment and successful achievement from educational responsibilities

(Personal Accomplishment). It was found that school related environmental factors such as years of teaching, years at the present job and teaching at a secondary level impacted negatively and resulted in teacher stress, even though attempting to cope with the situation.

Such factors enter into an underlying interrelation of personal and environmental conditions which then lead to strain. Mediating functions such as coping strategies may be helpful in managing demands which would otherwise tax individual resources (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Lazarus (1981) conceptualized a transactional theory of coping. From this perspective, emphasis is given to process, fluctuation and change among variables. The transaction occurs between the person and the environment which is viewed in terms of an ongoing reciprocal relationship (Coyne, Aldwin & Lazarus, 1981).

Multiple coping modes have been identified (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) and an instrument, The Ways of Coping (Revised), was designed which differentiates eight coping strategies employed by individuals in dealing with daily situations (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). The eight coping strategies are: (a) CONFRONTING COPING which refers to taking direct action toward the persons believed to be causing the difficulty, as well as releasing feelings; (b) DISTANCING which refers to strategies used to reduce perceptions of the seriousness of the situation; (c) SELF CONTROLLING which refers to efforts which regulate thoughts and feelings encountered as a result of a stressful situation;

(d) SEEKING SOCIAL SUPPORT which refers to strategies in which individuals enlist the support or advice of others; (e) ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY which refers to thoughts which sustain hope and beneficial attitudes about personal growth and change; (f) PLANFUL PROBLEM SOLVING which refers to active problem solving strategies such as making a plan of action; (g) ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE which refers to a combination of withdrawing interest in external reality, focusing on wishes, and using measures to reduce tension; and (h) POSITIVE REAPPRAISAL which refers to thoughts which sustain hope and attitudes which are beneficial towards positive growth and change.

Much effort has been focused on coping with the three dimensions of stress, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment. Strategies such as physical exercise, relaxation periods, temporary withdrawal from direct client/student interaction, work breaks and changes in routine have been suggested (Sanders, 1983). Apparently as stress still continues to be a definable problem certain strategies used are not effective for coping with the interrelation of personal and environmental factors, or are being applied incorrectly. Identification of those coping strategies being utilized by classroom teachers yet still resulting in stress for those individuals would be most beneficial.

PURPOSE:

This study sought to determine:

(a) the degree and dimension of teacher stress currently prevalent in the classroom setting

(b) the effect of specific personal, professional and school related factors, i.e. class size, school size, student ability (average, slow, gifted, special education) on the contribution to the incidence of burnout in classroom teachers, and

(c) the effect of specific coping strategies on the contribution to the incidence of stress in classroom teachers.

METHODOLOGY:

Quantitative data was collected using (1) a demographic questionnaire which provided information regarding personal, professional and school characteristics, (2) the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which provides a measure of perceived burnout in terms of three subscales: (a) Emotional Exhaustion, feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhaused by one's work; (b) Depersonalization, unfeeling and impersonal responses towards recipients of one's service, care, treatment or instruction; and (c) Personal Accomplishment, feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people and (3) the Ways of Coping (Revised) which identifies specific coping strategies that people use to deal with the internal and/or external demands of specific stressful encounters. The eight coping strategies are measured by the Ways of Coping (Revised) are (a) Confronting Coping,(b) Distancing,

(c) Self Controlling, (d) Seeking Social Support, (e) Accepting Responsibility, (f) Planful Problem Solving, (g) Escape/Avoidance and (h) Positive Reappraisal. Descriptive statistics, Pearson Correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the interrelationships among the educational factors, perceived burnout and coping strategies. This study used quantitative data from a random sample of 117 classroom teachers (Elementary, n=54; Secondary, n=63) from schools in the metropolitan New York area.

FINDINGS:

Results were analyzed in the order of our objectives-prevalence of burnout in the classroom teacher, the effects of personal, professional and school related factors contributing towards burnout and the effect of specific coping strategies on the contribution to the incidence of stress in classroom teachers. The data producing sample of classroom teachers presented the following characteristics (see Table 1): 78 females and 39 males who represented 54 Elementary and 63 Secondary teachers. The average years of teaching experience for this group was 10 years, while the mean years of teaching in their current position was 5 years which indicates some movement within these teachers' careers. The average school size was 600 students enrolled with an average class size of 25 students. Educational ability of the students was represented by the following class composition: special education, 6; slow, 1; average, 58; gifted, 15; and mixed, 37.

As a total sample, these classroom teachers perceived themselves to be in a moderate degree of stress for all three dimensions of burnout, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment (see Table 2). In fact, as a group these teachers were experiencing the same (moderate) degree of stress in the three dimensions as those individuals sampled to formulate the original "Completed college" norms for the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and that data was analyzed over ten years ago before strong efforts focused upon the reduction of teacher stress!

Investigating teacher variables and burnout, significant correlations (see Table 3) were found between the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization dimensions of stress and Class Size (increased class size resulted in higher stress for the teachers) and Amount of Principal Support (less principal support resulted in greater teacher burnout). Correlations were found between the Personal Accomplishment dimension of burnout and educational Level Taught (secondary teachers experienced more stress).

Investigating relationships between Coping Strategies and Burnout, significant correlations (see Table 4) were found between Confronting and Emotional Exhaustion (coping using Confronting tended to result in the Emotionally Exhaustive aspect of stress); Distancing and Emotional exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment (coping using Distancing tended to result in greater degrees of

Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization aspects of stress, but the use of this coping strategy was helpful to increase feelings of Personal Accomplishment); Accepting Responsibility and Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment (Coping using the strategy of Accepting Responsibility resulted in greater Emotional Exhaustion, but was helpful to increase feelings of Personal Accomplishment).

Further correlations were found between Escape/Avoidance and all three dimensions of burnout (coping using the strategy of Escape/Avoidance tended to result in greater feelings of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization and fewer feelings of Personal Accomplishment); and Problem Solving and Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment (coping using the strategy of Problem Solving resulted in lower amounts of stress in the Depersonalization dimension of burnout and an increase in feelings of Personal Accomplishment).

Stepwise Multiple Regression (Table 5) found the coping strategy Escape/Avoidance as showing a significantly unique contribution to the frequency of Emotional Exhaustion for the sampled population of classroom teachers. Specifically, Escape/Avoidance entered a Step 1 and explained 12% of the variance. The other variables failed to enter the equation as they did not reach significance at the .05 level.

Stepwise Multiple Regression (Table 5) found the coping strategies of Excape/Avoidance and Positive Reappraisal as showing a significantly unique contribution to the frequency of Depersonalization for the sampled

population of classroom teachers. Specifically, Escape/Avoidance entered on Step 1 and explained 12% of the variance; Positive Reappraisal entered on Step 2 and explained 16% of the variance. The other variables failed to enter the equation as they did not reach significance at the .05 level.

Stepwise Multiple Regression (Table 5) found the coping strategy of Positive Reappraisal and Escape/Avoidance as showing a significantly unique contribution to the frequency of Personal Accomplishment for the sampled population of teachers. Specifically, Positive Reappraisal entered on Step 1 and explained 13% of the variance; Escape/Avoidance entered on Step 2 and explained 22% of the variance. The other variable failed to enter the equation as they did not reach significance at the .05 level.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS:

Stress continues to be felt in increasing dimensions of burnout since last investigation. This group of teachers perceived themselves as being emotionally overextended and fatigued, initiating unfeeling and impersonal attitudes towards their students, as well as realizing few feelings of accomplishment and successful achievement from their educational responsibilities. This is a disappointing finding considering all the efforts towards stress reduction in the teaching environment which have been initiated in the past few years.

Perhaps the methodologies towards stress reduction are just not effective or are being used incorrectly compared to the force of stressful factors found within the classroom.

Increasing class size appears to be a stressful factor. This is an area of concern from both professional educators and parents alike. Increasing urban enrollments may be occurring as a result of population influx, school closings and redistricting. Current budgets do not reflect increased funding to hire new teachers and, in fact, many budgets are being severely restricted and state and federal monies are being reduced. A change for the better in this variable does not seem plausible. Some mediating factor needs to be established to assist these professionals in their work environment.

Secondary teachers continue to experience more stress than Elementary teachers. This finding suports previous research (Borthwick, 1982; Connolly & Sanders, 1986; Farber, 1982; Horton, 1984). Apparently interaction with secondary students is more difficult as many additional external factors have an impact on students during the adolescent and teenage years.

A supportive administration and particularly direct support from the principal has surfaced as an important factor in stress reduction in the workplace. The element of "buffer" has been identified as the needed administrative support (Cobb, 1976; Connolly, 1985; Farber, 1982; Horton, 1984; Hudson & Meager, 1984; McNeeley, 1983; Schaefer, C. & Coyne, J.C. & Lazarus, 1982; Tholts, P., 1982).

The major focus of this investigation was to determine those coping strategies which relate to a negative emotional state resulting in stress. The coping strategy of Escape/Avoidance was associated with all three dimensions of burnout, Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment. The Excape/Avoidance coping strategy combines elements of wishful thinking, denial and palliative measures. Wishful thinking items include, "Wished the situation would go away", "Hoped a miracle would happen", "Had fantasies about how things might turn out", and "Refused to believe that the difficulty had happened". Palliative measures that could be employed while using this strategy include the use of food, sleep, drugs or cigarettes. Avoidance involves limiting contact with people and using the defense mechanism of displacement, taking out negative feelings on others.

The teachers who are using this strategy are inactive when faced with a problem. They tend to use techniques of wishful thinking and avoidance in place of active, problem-solving approaches. Limited psychological investment is made to any project and these types of behaviors would contribute to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low feelings of personal accomplishment which may trigger the use of Escape/Avoidance.

The other strategy that produces behaviors resulting in negative feelings of depersonalization and personal accomplishment was Positive

Reappraisal. This was an initially surprising finding as the use of this coping strategy is associated with perceptions that through the actual encountering of difficulties, persons are led to experience self growth. This coping strategy would describe a person who views events in a positive, rather than in a negative way. Perhaps one can infer that this strategy is a sort of "Polyanna" attitude (an attitude that sees everything as being just fine and that only positive things can happen if one hopes for the best).

Since the use of certain coping strategies tends to contribute to rather than reduce the pressure of stress in classroom teachers, specific behaviors associated with ineffective coping strategies could be identified and avoided in practice. Those coping strategies tending to reduce stress could then be pursued.

TABLE 1

SAMPLED POPULATION OF TEACHERS' DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

GENDER	f	AGE	M	S.D.
Female	78		35	.88
Male	39			
Teaching LEVEL	**f**	**YEARS In Teaching Profession**	**M**	**S.D.**
Elementary	54		7	1.08
Secondary	63			
Academic Ability	**f**	**Years at Current Position**	**M**	**S.D.**
(classes)			5	.99
Gifted	15	**School Size**	**M**	**S.D.**
Average	58		600	1.37
Slow	1			
Special Ed.	6	**Class Size**	**M**	**S.D.**
Mixed	37		25	.72

TABLE 2

Comparison of Sample and Normative Data for Teachers and Others Who Completed College on the Maslach Burnout Inventory

	EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION		DEPERSONALIZATION		Personal Accomplishment	
	Frequency		frequency		frequency	
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	M	S.D.
TEACHERS (study sample)	18.48[b]	9.80	5.65[b]	6.08	37.16[b]	8.35
COMPLETED COLLEGE (norm)	24.66[b]	11.21	10.23[b]	6.73	34.34[b]	7.25

NOTE: Normative Data, (Maslach & Jackson, 1981)

a= low burnout
b= moderate burnout
c= high burnout

TABLE 3

Coefficients of Correlation Between Teacher[a] Variables and Perception of Burnout

	EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (frequency)	DEPERSONALIZATION (frequency)	PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT (frequency)
Class Size[b]	.2048**	.2165**	-.1269
Educational Level[b] Taught (Elementary/ Secondary)	.0190	.1276	-.1489*
Principal Support[b]	-.1833*	-.1892*	

Note. [a]n=117 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001
b= Pearson Correlation

TABLE 4

Coefficients of Correlation Between Coping Strategies and Perception of Burnout

	EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (frequency)	DEPERSONALIZATION (frequency)	PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT (frequency)
Confronting	.2557**	.1386	-.0771
Distancing	.2690	.2595**	.2415**
Seeking Social Support	.1025	.0751	.1678*
Accepting Responsibility	.2765***	.1066	.0308
Escape/ Avoidance	.3420***	-.1710	.2226**

NOTE. n=117 * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

n= Pearson Correlation

TABLE 5

Stepwise Multiple Regression of Teachers'[a] Perception of the Frequencies of Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment on Coping Strategies.

Step	Variable	Multiple R	R^2	Increase InR^2	F	Significance
EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION						
1.	Escape/Avoidance	.342	.12	_____	15.23	.0001
DEPERSONALIZATION						
1.	Escape/Avoidance	.345	.12	_____	15.59	.0001
2.	Positive Reappraisal	.398	.16	.28	10.74	.0000
PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT						
1.	Positive Reappraisal	.366	.13	_____	17.78	.0000
2.	Escape/Avoidance	.471	.22	.35	16.33	.000

n = 117

a = 121

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